**Writing Assignment 3: The Argumentation Paper**

**Controversy and Argumentation**

As you’ve surely seen over the course of this semester, just about anything we write is an argument. So long as there is at least one statement offered as support for another—so long as, that is, there is at least one reason for a claim—you have an argument. Period. So why are we calling this paper—when all the other papers have, by that very simple definition, involved making arguments—the “argumentation” paper?

Well, if you ask me, calling these papers “argumentation” papers is one of the ways in which English classes like this one may have helped the term “argument” to be viewed as necessarily involving hot-button issues, heated controversy, and, almost as a necessary result, rancorous emotions. (Read one of the arguments about global warming in *Patterns for College Writing* and see if one of those two arguments doesn’t get you really riled up.)

It may well be, simply put, that these assignments have helped to reinforce the idea that argument involves getting mad. We often think that it just involves getting to the point where we’re just trying to shout down the other side. Maybe things just get into name-calling or bouts of “Is not!” and “Is, too!” (There is a joke, by the way, involving a debater who scribbled in his notes, “Argument weak here. Shout loudly.”)

This rightly celebrated [Monty Python video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQFKtI6gn9Y), however, shows us that argument is “an intellectual process” and that it is decidedly *not* those things. It is not abuse, and it is not contradiction. Those, indeed, are poor, poor substitutes for arguments, and often they are what occur precisely when argumentation has failed.

But back to the question. Why is this called the “argumentation” paper? It is called that by our book because, at some level, the book does assume that argument involves, not just controversy, but weighty controversy. Controversy, like argument, doesn’t have to involve heated emotions. All controversy means is that there is a disagreement, and that how to resolve the disagreement is not a matter of consensus. Arguments—reasoned claims—are offered as an attempt to resolve that controversy.

David Zarefsky, in *Argumentation: The Study of Effective Reasoning*, says that there are five basic preconditions that must be met before an argument can take place. They are as follows:

1. A controversy exists.
2. The controversy is non-trivial (it matters to those involved).
3. The assent of the other party is desired.
4. That assent is valued only if freely given. (Forced agreement is not valued.)
5. There is no less risky way to resolve the dispute.

I want to focus especially on condition 2. Whether an argument is trivial or not depends of course on who’s having the discussion. Some people argue about whether Captain Kirk or Captain Picard is the superior captain in the *Star Trek* franchise. Some *Trek* fans will not even consider other captains for that honor on the grounds that none of the other captains were created while Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, was still alive.

Take yet another controversy. Some *Star Wars* fans argue that the prequels, released in theaters from 1999-2005, shouldn’t be considered canonical (official) because, they claim, the prequels depart in radical ways from the original trilogy (1977-1983), despite the original creator’s, George Lucas, stamp of approval on it. (As grounds, they note, for example, that the Force has now been reduced—note the loaded [?] terminology—to *midi-chlorians*, microscopic life-forms whose presence in the body makes one likely to become a Jedi or, alternatively, a Sith. They further claim that Lucas’s authority is irrelevant in this regard because the departures from the trilogy only demonstrate his desire to line his pocket still more.)

Now, some of you may find those controversies completely ridiculous, dismissing them as matter only hopeless nerds would even care to engage in. But, guess what? If you are one of those hopeless nerds—as I am—feel free to write about those or similar topics for this argumentation paper. Not everything one writes for these assignments has to be about global warming this, or abortion that.

(By the way, I am stipulating that no papers about global warming, abortion, creationism vs. evolution, same-sex marriage, legalizing an illegal substance, the “Ground Zero” mosque, or anything in which religion, in the form of biblical authority, is brought to bear will be permitted. Sorry, I’m sure you all have very lovely, world-changing ideas on such topics, but I have read them all, and I’d like you to use your imaginations a bit here. And, by the way: no school uniform-related papers, either. Direct those arguments to your administrators.)

My point—to come to it at last—is that “controversy” does not have to involve the huge, hot-button issues that flood our news channels every moment of every day and which repeat the same talking points over and over again. You may find an issue related to, say, a particular fandom or geekdom, a matter of local import, the accelerated commercialism of Christmas, cyber-bullying, Facebook privacy issues, how a subject (e.g., writing, math, science) should be taught in college, the interpretation of a poem or short story—any number of topics are possible. **By noon Friday of this week (November 12), notify me, through the Blackboard Message function, your general topic for my approval. I will have an answer for you by the following day**.

**Assignment Specifications**

In an essay *no less than* five (5) full pages in MLA format, argue a thesis—be it fact, definition, value or policy—and provide at least three (3) *reputable* outside sources (Wikipedia does not count). These sources may include periodicals such as the newspaper, magazine (e.g., *Time*, *Newsweek*), scholarly articles, reference books (not the encyclopedia), et cetera.

Not all outside sources have to be used for the purposes of *support* (corroboration). Let me explain—let me argue—further. Arguments that don’t address opposing views tend to look especially weak and “one-sided.” They may even make the arguer appear afraid of a challenge. Additionally, a lot of the substance for an argument can come from refuting an opposing side. You’ll find that addressing opposing views can be an easy way to generate a good deal of material—with the added bonus of helping to meet those pesky length requirements!

So, should you find a source that would argue against your position, don’t be quick to dismiss it. Look at it. Use it. Address it. It’s not always the case that showing one side to be in error automatically makes your argument the better choice, but it can certainly help.

AUDIENCE: For this paper, assume an audience somewhat unfamiliar with the subject matter, so provide some relevant background information in the introduction, as needed in the body, or both.

ORGANIZATION: As usual, this paper will have three basic parts: an introduction, a body and a conclusion. The introduction will establish relevance—where you, in essence, argue for the argument—the body will contain the substance of your argument, and the conclusion will cinch off the discussion with some kind of summing-up thought and perhaps a memorable final remark. In the body, be sure that you devote at least *one* paragraph to an opposing view or objection for the purposes of rebuttal and refutation. Place it where seems best to you.

TONE/STYLE: Consider this writing situation to be a formal one, so write for a well informed, educated audience expecting civil discussion. While your paper in assigning cause may also assign *blame*, keep your remarks respectful. Because you wish to be engaging as well as to make your point, varying sentence structure (which often happens “naturally” without being stipulated as a requirement) is a good idea.

DUE DATE: This paper is due in my inbox at [barnes.english@gmail.com](mailto:barnes.english@gmail.com) on **April 26**, by 7:00pm. To make things easy for me to organize, submit your document as a Microsoft Word document saved as **WA3YourLastName.docx**. No late work will be accepted.

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